

Sketch of the Life of  
Charles Balthazar  
Julien Fevret de Saint-  
Mémin \*



Issued to accompany an Exhibition of  
his Engraved Portraits at the Grolier  
Club, March 9-25, 1899 \*

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by  
F. Weitenkampf



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gravier club

## SAINT-MÉMIN.

**T**HE remarkable collection of portraits here introduced has a twofold interest: it represents a noteworthy portion of the life-work of a talented and industrious man, and forms a highly interesting pictorial record of notable figures in the early history of our republic.

Charles Balthazar Julien Fevret de Saint-Mémin lived a long and honorable life, a dozen years of which sufficed for the production of about 800 of these "medallion portraits," in which the lineaments of so many distinguished Americans have been traced and preserved for posterity. Born at Dijon, March 12, 1770,—as the son of Benigne Charles Fevret de Saint-Mémin, counsellor in the Parliament of Dijon, and Victoire-Marie de Notmans, a St. Dominican creole of remarkable beauty,—he was pre-

pared for the military profession. On April 1, 1784, he entered the military school in Paris, which he left on May 8th of the following year, receiving the grade of ensign on April 27, 1788. His predilection for art soon asserted itself, as did also his aptitude for the mechanical arts, and he busied himself much with drawing, painting, watchmaking, the making of models and similar ingenious practices,— all diversions then, but soon to become a valuable resource. Then came the Revolution, and in 1790 he went to Switzerland, whither his parents and sisters followed him. When the “Army of the Princes” was formed, he served in it as second-lieutenant of infantry, and eventually was awarded the cross of honor as a lieutenant-colonel. On the disbanding of the army he returned to his family at Fribourg, Switzerland, where he practised carving and gilding.

And now came the turning-point in his career. In March, 1793, his father and he set out for St. Domingo, in order to save the mother's extensive estates from sequestration. Reaching New York by a circuitous route, they were apprised of the unfortunate state of affairs in St. Domingo, and finding the product of the cultivation of a little garden insufficient to eke out their failing resources, Saint-Mémin began turning his talents to account. A friend describes his first efforts

thus: "The Messrs. de Saint-Mémin . . . came to live with us in a charming house . . . which overlooked the city. They enjoyed a superb view, which extended on one side over the whole harbor. Charmed with the beauty of the landscape, M. de Saint-Mémin made an accurate drawing of it. At that time there was no other extant; we suggested the idea of engraving and circulating it. I introduced him myself to the public library, in order that he might obtain from an Encyclopedia a knowledge of the first principles of engraving. He made himself a perfect master of it."

Some views of New York and other engravings were produced by our newly fledged artist, who then prepared to introduce in this country a style of engraved portraits in profile which had been very popular in Paris (invented by Chrétien in 1786, we are told). Ph. Guignard, in his address at the Academy of Dijon (1853),<sup>1</sup> says:

"To construct the physionotrace<sup>2</sup> by which the portrait was to be drawn; the pantograph

<sup>1</sup> Published in translation in "The St.-Mémin collection of portraits; consisting of seven hundred and sixty medallion portraits, principally of distinguished Americans, photographed by J. Gurney and Son, of New York . . . New York, published by Elias Dexter, 1862."

<sup>2</sup> This instrument served to produce a profile in outline, which was then filled in,—with crayon on paper; with the engraving tools on the copper-plate.

by which the portrait was to be reduced to the right proportion; these were not for him the most embarrassing parts of the subject: it was for him much more difficult to make the little roulettes necessary for engraving upon copper the reduced drawings. Having little else than the Encyclopedia to guide him,<sup>1</sup> M. de Saint-Mémin triumphed over all obstacles. Eventually making the roulettes by the aid of a machine of his own invention, he perfected the manner and surpassed the models which he proposed to imitate.

“Another compatriot, M. de Valdenuit, joined him in the beginning of his enterprise, . . . and the first portraits engraved by M. de Saint-Mémin were inscribed with the names of both. . . .

“A portrait, the size of life, in black crayon upon tinted paper, framed, the copper-plate and one dozen proofs were, together, furnished for thirty-three dollars.

“That which at first required two weeks to accomplish, could afterward be completed in three days, so greatly had M. de Saint-Mémin been able to abridge the labor by ingenious inventions.”

The artist preserved two sets of impressions

<sup>1</sup> According to Guignard, Saint-Mémin seems to have acquired most of his information from the oft-mentioned “Encyclopedia.”

of these portraits, writing the name of the subject over each; one set is in the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, the other is exhibited here. It is an interesting series of heads which he has left for us: characteristic types of the Americans who worked and lived in the days when the republic was young; who helped to develop it and build it up. Many classes and professions are represented in the list of those who sat to him: presidents, statesmen, judges, lawyers, military and naval officers, physicians, clergymen, merchants, bankers, artists, editors, apothecaries, planters among them.

Various localities were the scene of his activity. Beginning with New York, in deference to local interest, we have among his subjects: Chancellor Robert R. Livingston; De Witt Clinton and his wife; Stephen Van Rensselaer, LL. D. (major-general, lieutenant-governor, and M. C.); Pierre Van Cortlandt, M. C.; Archibald Bruce, M. D.; Nicholas De Peyster, Jr., and Daniel Ludlow, merchants; John Navarre Macomb; Wm. Bache, lawyer; Killaen K. van Rensselaer; Miss Eliza Livingston (daughter of Judge Brockholst Livingston); Mrs. Livingston, *née* Sarah Johnson (wife of Philip P. Livingston); and Schuyler Livingston and his wife Eliza. Turning to the other States, we find names such as those of Paul Revere, Josiah Quincy, and

Timothy Pickering, of Massachusetts; Major-General Henry Dearborn, of New Hampshire; Theodore Sedgwick, of Connecticut; Oliver Hazard Perry, of Rhode Island; Elias Boudinot, LL. D., Aaron Burr and his daughter Theodosia, and Capt. James Lawrence, of New Jersey; A. J. Dallas, Benjamin Rush (the noted physician), C. W. Peale (the artist), and Wm. Y. Birch (bookseller), of Pennsylvania; Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Commodore Stephen Decatur, George Washington Parke Custis, and Gen. James Wilkinson, of Maryland; George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Wm. Henry Harrison, Chief Justice John Marshall, Bushrod Washington, Henry Lee, Meriwether Lewis, and William Wirt, of Virginia.

These are some of the more noted names among those prominent in political, professional or social life, whom our artist portrayed. To these are added a number of Frenchmen, Talleyrand and the famous engineer Marc Isambard Brunel among them.

In 1798 Mme. de Saint-Mémin and one of her daughters came to America, and the family removed to Burlington, near Philadelphia, where the ladies established a boarding-school, and where, in the same year, Saint-Mémin, we are told, executed the last portrait of Washington taken from life. His engraved portraits of Washing-

ton, by the way, were executed in a much smaller size than usual, and it is stated that they were used in mourning-rings and breastpins after Washington's death. Saint-Mémin, in the exercise of his profession, visited successively Baltimore, Annapolis, Washington and Richmond, and found time also to execute some landscape views, including a panorama of Niagara Falls. A camera obscura, constructed by himself, aided him in such work.

Napoleon's measures in favor of emigrants took him to Paris in 1810. When he returned to America in 1812, he found his sight too much impaired to continue engraving, and took up oil-painting. Finally, in 1815, he returned, with his mother and sister, definitively to France; and so great was his joy that he is said to have broken his physionotrace, as though to blot out all remembrance of his troubles. On the 27th of July, 1817, he was appointed director of the Museum of Dijon, for which position he was, by his tastes and knowledge, well fitted.

Various ingenious inventions emanated from his busy brain in the succeeding years,—a “perspective pantograph” (which, from horizontal and vertical projections, produced elevations in perspective), a canvas-stretching device, movable models, etc.

The appreciation of his compatriots was shown

by his election to various learned societies, and the Minister of the Interior, who removed him in 1848, found it expedient to rescind his order in the following year.

Saint-Mémin is described as modest, "sweet in disposition, and very reflective; he possessed an extraordinary aptitude for all the sciences, a manipulation remarkable, and a perseverance beyond question." He had a fondness for mathematics, and his natural taste for precision accounts for the exact finish in his work. In 1852, on the 23d of June, he died at the age of 82, the last male descendant of a noble family, of whom P. Oudin said: "There was always that particular glory common to the Fevrets, of seeming to be born for the ornament of letters and the good of their country."

F. WEITENKAMPF.

